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Equality, Citizenship, and Segregation: a Defense of Separation by Michael S Merry

Let me begin with a declaration: I like Michael, he's good company, has been to my house, played with my kids. If you turn to the back cover of his book you will find I have written an endorsement. Consequently, I am unlikely to be the most hard-nosed critic here.

Geography is important. It is the lens through which people study segregation. Segregation is about separations that are geographical and social – residential segregation and the development of ethnic enclaves within cities, for example. It is within those spaces of separation that fear of others, misunderstanding, rumour, gossip, innuendo and inequalities of opportunity are said to emerge – where people live parallel lives, to use a phrase that emerged following the 2001 riots in a small number of English cities. Since spatial injustice and spatial intolerance are rightly regarded a blights on a well functioning and aspirationally meritocratic society, policies of integration attempt to overcome the separations and to render geography neutral, most infamously, perhaps, by the policies of bussing forcing more ethnically mixed schools within the United States.

Michael is not an apologist for segregation: there is no suggestion in his book that it is right that a person's ethno-cultural heritage (in the case of ethnic segregation) or a person's place of birth (in the case of class or social segregation) should constrain the opportunities available to a person along their life course, affecting their education, their employment, their choice of residence, their quality of life, their health and their chances of encountering poverty and exclusion. However, he does challenge the idea that heavy-handed policies of integration are necessarily the means to achieve socially desirable outcomes in the context of a societies where every person may be born equal under God (if not always in the eyes of religious organisations) but are most certainly not born with equal social and cultural capital, equal access to resources, equal influence and power nor with equal opportunity to obtain them.

I first met Michael at a European conference discussing choice in educational systems. My paper was called 'segregation by choice?', unintentionally replicating the title of a paper Michael had written some years earlier. There is a belief (especially amongst more left-of-centre academics like myself) that systems of school choice encourage ethnic segregation. For example, Matthew Taylor, chair of the Social Integration Commission, recently was reported as saying that social and ethnic segregation is worsening in Britain because of the increasing number of faith and free schools (reported in the media, January 1, 2015). He may be right, although it is worth nothing the evidence that school choice increases segregation is scant (Gorard et al., 2003), and although there has been suggestion that school level ethnic segregation is greater than residential segregation (Johnston et al., 2006), that may be explicable to a demographic effect: ethnic minority populations are younger that the majority, White British population so there are relatively more of these groups in schools than in the all-ages Census population. In fact, choice is probably not the problem but geography. Alun Jones, President of the Girls' School Association, spoke-out

in defence of fee-charging schools, arguing it is not they that are responsible for social division but the effects of geography and especially the housing market: "I would say that 80 per cent of the social apartheid one sees in schools at the moment is actually because of geography" (reported in the media, Dec. 31, 2014). Left-leaning academics are generally suspicious of private schools but, in this case, the President makes a good point.

Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, assume schools are indeed ethnically segregated in the UK. If this is regarded as undesirable then one solution is to try and force more mixing. Unfortunately, this is a policy that is unequal in its impact. In London, in 2011, approximately 35 per cent of secondary school pupils were White British (the largest group). About 5 per cent of pupils were Bangladeshi. We could try and create schools with intakes that reflected these percentages but it would be far more disruptive to the minority group than to the majority: Bangladeshis are spatially concentrated in greatest numbers in particular parts of London. To somehow spread them more equally across the capital's educational establishments would be enormously disruptive to their local peer networks and therefore not conducive their learning – which is the same sort of argument that is made for why bussing in the United States was harmful to minority groups.

Besides, even supposing that school choice leads to increased segregation – and, to recall, it is not at all clear that it does – what is the basis for complaint in a liberal society that seems otherwise to make a virtue out of promoting and offering choice (then rewarding those who make 'good choices' and blaming those who don't?)? If people choose segregation – if the segregation is in some sense 'voluntary' – then for policy makers, politicians and the media to turn around and complain that they do not like the outcome seems somewhat incongruous, especially as the complaint is directed at the groups that in other contexts appear to benefit least from neoliberal policies of choice and marketization.

It is, therefore, odd for liberal societies to adopt somewhat illiberal policies or rhetoric designed to change or curtail the outcomes of choice, even if those policies are well intentioned. Michael takes the argument further. Assume, again, that segregation – in the sense less of people choosing to separate from others but more in the sense of choosing to live with their own ethno-cultural/social peers – is to some degree voluntary and that it provides the opportunity to form a bulwark against the tides of injustice, inequality or intolerance that the groups experience. What is the wisdom, or the justice, in removing or undermining that bulwark? Moreover, if we can talk of communities of segregation, then what sorts of values are cultivated within those communities? The possibilities that the book raises are those of citizenship, virtue and trust, which need not be inward looking but can bridge outwards to other, different, groups. Hence the language and actuality of segregation need and ought not to be perceived as wholly negative and pejorative – rather than unintentionally denigrate those who experience segregation, we might instead recognise the individual, collective and social benefits of those who act to reclaim and transform their

own segregated experiences for the good of themselves and, potentially, for the good of others.

Is this a little idealistic? Some, I am sure, would think so. In the UK, as in other countries, there is current concern about religious differences and extremes. The thrust of media commentary is towards the view that multiculturalism has failed, that levels of immigration are too great, and that more needs to be done to protect traditional values and the national identity of the UK (whatever those might actually be). Finding virtue in difference is challenging at any time and perhaps especially at this time. Yet, it might also be argued that a discourse that tends to blame the victims of segregation – and this is most noticeable in the context of social segregation and the way that the British white poor are portrayed as "chavs" or "underserving" – is hardly likely to do anything other than propagate divisions, misunderstanding and antipathy (or worse) to the more socially dominant.

But does the language of voluntary separation, employed widely in the book, itself cause problems? Kapoor (2013) has expressed concern that in the aftermath of the 2001 UK Census and the finding that ethnic segregation was increasing (albeit for demographic reasons), the debate was framed in terms of minority groups choosing to live apart from the majority when actually there are deeply engrained structural reasons that create ethnic and social geographies, and patterns of separation, that have little to do with a personal choice. Michael is aware of this, and his notion of voluntary separation is circumscribed. Nevertheless, I am sure some readers will be uneasy with the language.

The book may also play to the notion that segregation is present and worsening in nations like the UK. In fact, the evidence is that ethnic segregation is decreasing in the UK and that members of ethnic minorities do not choose to self-separate but are instead moving outwards from their more traditional ethnic enclaves and areas of spatial concentration into other places where they generate more mixed neighbourhoods with other ethnic groups. In other words, the dominant process is not voluntary separation but voluntary mixing. The exception to this may be the White British who appear to be leaving urban centres such as London and some of the industrial cities to the North of England. Even so, whether this is an act of self-separation or more a consequence of aging, retirement or having the wealth and opportunity to live in rural locations is not at all clear. The irony is that a book that tends towards a rather rosy disposition and appraisal of the possibilities of separation may not have fully recognised where and why those separations are disappearing and where the prospects for 'integration' may be good, without needing to be forced. The reason why this happens may be because the book – although it draws on a wide range of sources – is lacking hard empirical, especially quantitative evidence, to support what it is saying. That does not make the ideas any less interesting or theoretically informed but it would nevertheless be a worthwhile and useful project to run with the theories (for example, voluntary segregation generating civic engagement or virtue) and test them.

To end where I began: I like Michael and I like this book. As I wrote in my endorsement, “it is a book that deserves to be carefully read and widely debated.” I stand by those words but leave it to others to be more critical.

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